

Jordie Albiston was born in Melbourne in 1961. Her first poetry collection *Nervous Arcs* (Spinifex, 1995) won first prize in the Mary Gilmore Award, second in the Anne Elder Award, and was short listed for the NSW Premier's Award. Her second book was entitled *Botany Bay Document: A Poetic History of the Women of Botany Bay* (Black Pepper, 1996). Her most recent collection, *The Hanging of Jean Lee* (Black Pepper, 1998), explores the life and death of Jean Lee; the last woman hanged in Australia (1951). Jordie received the Dinny O'Hearn Memorial Fellowship in 1997, and was original editor of the poetry e-zine *Divan*. She holds a PhD in English literature, and has two teenage children. She is currently writing full-time on an Australia Council grant.

If passion, intensity and dedication are the hallmarks of the committed poet, Jordie Albiston surely stands out as a poet whose insights are characterised by all three qualities.

Whilst not necessarily a name well known to those outside the inner-sanctum of Australian poetry, Jordie is undoubtedly an emerging force on the Australian poetry scene. Indeed, her focused and hard-working approach to her craft have already resulted in an impressive track record of publications including three poetry collections - *Nervous Arcs* (Spinifex: '95), *Botany Bay Document: A Poetic History of the Women of Botany Bay* (Black Pepper: '96), and *The Hanging of Jean Lee* (Black Pepper: '98) - as well as numerous literary accolades including first prize in the Mary Gilmore Award, second in the Anne Elder Award, short listing in the NSW Premier's Award and a Dinny O'Hearn Memorial Fellowship in 1997.

Although Albiston's early published collections are closely bound up with themes concerning women, history and truth, Albiston has since moved on to exploring new themes and horizons in her later writings. Indeed, her English literature Ph.D. work on the Salem witch trials looked at the 'confessions' of alleged witches and the differences between oral-based accused and literate accused and how literacy affected notions of truth, as well as outcomes at trial. As Jordie recalls, "I went to Salem and looked at all the materials, and yes they were bizarre."

While Jordie admits there have been many subtle influences on her poetry, one poet in particular stands out for her as a source of admiration in that of Emily Dickinson.

Despite admiring the work of poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton - two "confessional poets" often mentioned in connection with Albiston's work - Albiston doesn't believe that a poet must be emotionally destructive towards themselves and others in order to be successful in their work. Indeed, she suggests that the pursuit of poetry must always come second to love and other relationships: "I only have heart and art in my life, but heart comes first. The outgoing love that you have for the external circumstances and the people that you love. Poetry is my big thing, but it must come second to love. And I don't know whether it did with Plath and Sexton...they wrote amazing poetry, but they left a trail of Karmic pain behind..."

Consequently, while Plath and Sexton are poets that Albiston greatly respects, her most admired poetic influence undoubtedly remains with Emily Dickinson. So impressed with Dickinson's work is Jordie that she originally considered writing her Ph.D. thesis on the linguistics of Dickinson's poetry. Jordie enthuses, "She's amazing...she uses words that have multiple meanings...I see her poems as cubes ...the meanings of her words shoot through in all directions..."

Although an accomplished reader of her work, Jordie shies away from the notion that the poet should be both writer and performer in one. While there is a growing and inexorable trend towards poets reading and performing their work in public, Albiston doesn't see that there should be a necessary link between the poet as a writer and the poet as a performer. Indeed, for her, there is no necessary relationship between the two phenomena: "The relationship doesn't interest me at all...there is no relationship for me..."

Similarly, Albiston believes that the marketing of poetry is something that remains quite detached from the writing of the work. Accordingly, she is prepared to put the writing of her work above and beyond all other concerns in the sense that publication of her work is not the goal but a by-product of her labours as a poet. Jordie suggests, "I'm not interested in marketing myself, I don't care whether my work gets published or not. I don't care if when I die the poems are just all sitting there next to my bed. It's never [publishing work] been an issue for me."

While Albiston has steered away from the performance of her own poems, this has certainly not deterred others from adapting and performing her work. Indeed, an adaptation of Albiston's *The Hanging of Jean Lee* was performed as a one-woman show last year at Melbourne's La Mama with resounding success. It was also recorded as a one-hour radio drama produced and broadcast by ABC Radio National. Other adaptations of her work for performance include an opera based on *Botany Bay Document* that is currently in progress.

In stark contrast to her rejection of the notion of the poet as a performer, Albiston vigorously embraces the role of the poet as sage or teller of societies' sometimes-unpleasant truths. To this end, Albiston believes that the role of the poet in society is as relevant and vital today as it ever was throughout any point in history. Accordingly, the poet and the life of poets contain mixed blessings for both the individual and the society in which they seek to thrive. Albiston reflects, "The poet is still what the poet always was...it's a curse and a blessing...the poet is the person who synthesizes the current culture and speaks from the deep-self centre of truth...they're not always wanted..."

So what in Albiston's eyes are the qualities needed in the makings of a 'great' poet? From her standpoint, an uncanny ability with words is probably one of the most outstanding qualities required in setting a poet apart. Accordingly, Albiston believes strongly in the notion that "...A poet uses words in an uncanny fashion..."

Whilst an impressive facility for words is obvious in Albiston's work, music has also had an important influence on her ability to craft poetry. Originally studying flute at

Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne, the study of music has become an underpinning force in Jordie's poetry in the sense that it led her to a deeper understanding of the many technical attributes of poetry including metricality, rhythm and the "...third dimension [of] orchestration."

So what advice would Jordie give to poets starting out? "Make sure you have some source of self nourishment. Poetry itself nourishes you a lot but the outside world doesn't," she counsels.

And her response to the ubiquitous question: 'Is it possible to make a living as a poet?' "No. It's not possible to make a living as a poet. Make sure you have an additional source of income," she suggests.

So what's next in store for this dedicated and hard working poet? Currently Jordie is writing a collection of chained verse full-time on Australia Council grant and enjoying the opportunity to concentrate intently on her work. So it's focus, discipline and "poetry for breakfast..." while we gladly await the fruits of her talented and inspired writing.

Interview and Story by Marcus Niski Copyright 2001

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